



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ABSENTEEISM IN LABOR

IT is only within the last four years that American students of labor problems have realized the instability of modern labor.¹ The amount of the labor turnover has clearly demonstrated that the modern wage relationship is transitory as well as impersonal.² Miss Jane Addams mentions the case of a workman who had never met the employer for whom he had worked for twenty years. The real marvel in this case, however, is not that they had never met but rather that the workman had remained with one firm for so long a time. The investigations into labor turnover have been numerous, and they have uniformly shown that the average workman rarely stays more than one year at any one job and that more often than not he changes jobs from two to three and in many cases from six to twelve times a year. These conditions, moreover, seem to apply, not only to manufacturing but to shipbuilding, lumbering, farm labor, construction work and navigation as well. Indeed, the turnover seems to be higher in the non-machine than in the machine industries.

There is, however, another factor in the instability of labor, which has not been given the attention that it deserves, namely, that of absenteeism or, as it is called in England, "lost time". Absenteeism means absence from work at the job at which one is employed. Although often confused with turnover and by no less authorities than the United States Bureau of Labor

¹ The importance of labor turnover was recognized by German scholars as early as 1908-10. See Marie Bernays, "Auslese und Anpassung der Arbeiterschaft der Geschlossenen Gross Industrie", *Schriften des Vereins für Social Politik*, vol. 133, 417 pages; Marie Bernays, "Berufswahl und Berufschicksal des Modernen Industrie Arbeiter", *Archiv für Social Wissenschaft und Social Politik*, vol. 35, pp. 123-176 and vol. 36, pp. 884-915; Richard Sorer, "Untersuchung über Auslese und Anpassung des Arbeiters", *Zeitschrift für Volkswirtschaft, Social Politik und Verwaltung*, vol. 21, pp. 727-747. I am indebted to my friend Dr. Paul F. Brissenden for calling my attention to the German literature upon the subject.

² For a statement of the extent, cost and causes of labor turnovers, see an article by the writer in the *American Economic Review*, June, 1918, pp. 306-316.

Statistics and the National Association of Employment Managers,¹ it is in reality entirely different, since turnover involves the leaving of a position by one worker and his replacement by another, while absenteeism involves absence from work before the position is vacated.

Absenteeism or "lost time" includes absence for full days, absence for half days or more and absence for less than a half day, the most important item in this last class being time lost through tardiness. The percentage of absenteeism for any given period may be obtained by dividing the total number of hours lost by the total number of hours that would have been worked, had all employees worked full time. It is seldom possible, however, to measure absenteeism so accurately because most attendance records give only the days and half days lost, not the total time lost because of tardiness.

1. *The Amount of Absenteeism*

The first extended investigation of absenteeism was made in England during the war for the British Health of Munition Workers Committee by Professor Thomas Loveday of the University of Durham.² This study was followed by one con-

¹ The National Association of Employment Managers on May 11, 1918, adopted the following method for computing labor turnover which was approved by the Bureau of Labor Statistics: Divide the number of separations in a given period by the average daily attendance and reduce to a yearly basis. This use of the average daily attendance, instead of the average number actually on the pay-roll as the divisor, confuses absenteeism with turnover. The difference between the two may be illustrated by the following example: A plant with an average force of 1,000 on the pay-roll has an average attendance of 900 for the week with 200 replacements; using the average attendance as the divisor we have the following equation: $\frac{200}{900} \times 52 = 1154\%$. Using the average number actually on the pay-roll as the divisor, we have the following equation: $\frac{200}{1000} \times 52 = 1040\%$. The method of the Bureau of Labor Statistics gives a turnover percentage of 114% higher than the second method, an excess which largely represents absenteeism rather than an actual changing of positions.

² Thomas Loveday, "The Causes and Conditions of 'Lost Time'", Committee on Industrial Fatigue and Efficiency, Report of Health of Munition Workers (no. 7), 1917, [Cd.] 8511, pp. 41-67.

ducted by the section on Economic Science and Statistics of the British Association and published in their 1917 volume, edited by Professor A. W. Kirkaldy.¹

Professor Kirkaldy reports 657 establishments where the average number of hours lost per head for the week ending February 16, 1917, was 2.4 for males and 5.1 for females. For the week ending March 16, 1917, the men in 789 engineering establishments lost 2.9 hours on the average and the women 1.8 hours, while for 654 firms in the week ending March 30, 1917, the average number of hours lost by the men was 2.2 and by the women 2.0.²

Unfortunately the total normal working-time is not given, so that it is impossible to derive any percentage computation. The attendance figures for a Scotch shell factory, however, were such that a study of the records for eight selected weeks in 1917 showed that the men lost 5.3 per cent. of the total possible hours which could have been worked had all worked the schedule planned by the firm, and that the women lost 7.8 per cent.³ The statistics secured for a large Leeds firm, which employed 12,000 workers, indicate that for 1913, 3.23 per cent. of the time was lost; for the first six months of 1914, 2.80 per cent.; for 1915, 3.63 per cent.; and for the first six months of 1916, 3.24 per cent.⁴ Professor Loveday's investigation of two small factories which have trustworthy records shows that the percentage of time lost through absenteeism, in one factory was 7.3 per cent. for the year ending October 1, 1916 and in the other, 5 per cent. for the month of August, 1916.⁵ A more intensive investigation of one department of a large factory, covering over three months in 1916, showed that the men lost 5.5 per cent. of their gross normal time and that the women lost 7.6 per cent.⁶ The Health of Munitions Workers Committee found that in one plant which they investigated the women on day work lost 10.4 per cent. of the possible normal

¹ A. W. Kirkaldy, *Industry and Finance*, especially pp. 44-62.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 47-49.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46 *et seq.*

⁵ Loveday, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

time and those on night work lost 13.2 per cent.¹ While the number of hours and the percentage of time lost varied greatly from plant to plant, the result of the British investigations proved that it formed a large fraction of the working time of the average employee.

Within the last two years several investigations into absenteeism in labor have been made in the United States which, incomplete as they necessarily are, have nevertheless disclosed something of its extent in industry. The study by Sydenstricker, Wheeler and Goldberger, conducted in 1916 in seven South Carolina cotton-mill towns for the Public Health Service, but not published until November, 1918, gives some interesting results concerning absenteeism for the months from January to May, 1916, inclusive, which are shown in the following table: ²

Average no. wage-earning persons per month	Total no. possible working days	Days not at work	Percentage of total possible working days lost
1541	183,918	20,807	11.3

The Industrial Management Council of Rochester conducted an inquiry into the amount of absenteeism in fifteen industrial plants for the month of November, 1917. The following table shows the result of their investigation:

Possible productive hours	Number of hours lost	Percentage of time lost
2,655,552	69,744	2.6

The amount of absenteeism was found to be much less in the largest plant investigated than it was in the fourteen smaller establishments.

¹ [Cd.] 8511, p. 34.

² Sydenstricker, Wheeler and Goldberger, "Disabling Sickness Among the Population of Seven Cotton-Mill Villages of South Carolina in Relation to Family Income", Reprint no. 492 from Public Health Reports, p. 11.

Dr. Boris Emmett, in his analysis of the employment records of a large motor-vehicle plant, found that the average amount of absenteeism for the year ending April 1, 1918, was 6 per cent.¹ A New York manufacturing plant, with a working force of about 800, lost through absenteeism and tardiness the following amounts of time: ²

Month	No. of hours lost	Average number of hours lost per worker (approximately)
April.	9171	11.5
May	6892	8.5
June	5846	7.3
July	6894	6.6

Since the average length of the working week was not given no percentage can be computed, but it seems probable that the loss for the various months averaged from 3 to 5 per cent. A Newark firm estimated that they were compelled to employ 5 per cent. more workmen than were absolutely necessary because of absenteeism, while a certain New York firm found that its percentage of daily absences for July, 1918, was approximately 10 per cent. Part of this latter amount was, however, due to vacations. The Curtis Publishing Company had an absentee percentage of 4.2 per cent. in January, 1917. The absentee rate at the Compton-Knowles Loom Company for part of 1917 was 8½ per cent., while at the Hood Rubber Company it was 10 per cent. for the night shift and 8 per cent. for the day shift.³ At one time the Beacon Falls Rubber Company's absentees numbered 40 per cent. of their force,⁴ and

¹ Dr. Boris Emmett, "Labor Turn-Over and Employment Policies of a Large Motor Vehicle Manufacturing Establishment", *Monthly Review*, United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, October, 1918, (vol. 7, no. 4) p. 10.

² Bulletin no. 1, on Absenteeism, issued by the Information and Education Service, United States Department of Labor.

³ John S. Keir, "The Reduction of Absences and Lateness in Industry", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, May, 1917, pp. 141-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

7.54 per cent. of the working force of the American Pulley Company were absent daily for the year 1917.¹

Probably the most thorough study of absenteeism that has ever been made is that which was conducted by the Industrial Relations Division of the Emergency Fleet Corporation. The table on the next page covers only full days lost and does not include tardiness or half-day absence. It includes ninety shipbuilding companies, employing over 320,000 workers in September, 1918, for which continuous weekly records were available from January to September, 1918, inclusive.² The table shows the following very interesting facts: (a) The percentage of absenteeism was extremely high. In steel-ship yards 17.8 per cent. or over one-sixth of all full working days were lost through this factor, while in the wood-ship yards 13.2 per cent. or over one-eighth of the days were lost. (b) The percentage of absenteeism was considerably higher for steel than for wood yards. (c) Absenteeism was highest in the winter months, being 22.3 per cent. in the steel yards for the first quarter of the year, as contrasted with 16.0 per cent. and 15.5 per cent. for the second and third quarters respectively. (d) Absenteeism was lowest in the Pacific Coast yards and highest in those of New England.

It is undoubtedly true that the shipbuilding industry, during the abnormal period of 1918, was not typical of industry as a whole, but when taken in conjunction with other industries studied, both here and abroad, it discloses a leakage in labor due to absenteeism, which, while it cannot be definitely estimated, is of the utmost importance and is probably not far from being between 6 and 10 per cent. S. R. Rectanus, as the result of an independent investigation of several steel mills, estimates the amount of absenteeism at 10 per cent.³

¹ W. A. Sawyer, "Installing Employment Methods", *Industrial Management*, Jan., 1919, p. 7.

² The table in the text is adapted from one in an article by F. E. Wolfe and P. H. Douglas, entitled "Labor Administration in the Shipbuilding Industry During War Time II", *Journal of Political Economy*, May, 1919, p. 387.

³ S. R. Rectanus, "Absenteeism", p. 2. This was an address delivered before the National Association of Employment Managers, 1918, and privately printed.

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE DAILY ABSENTEES OF ALL EMPLOYEES OF 90 SHIPBUILDING COMPANIES

Steel Ship Yards

District	No. yards reporting	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	1st Quatr.	2nd Quatr.	3rd Quatr.	9 Mos.
Atlantic	7	32.1	32.0	29.0	27.0	21.9	20.9	20.3	16.7	21.7	31.0	23.0	19.6	23.7
Del. River	6	26.2	21.5	15.3	14.6	15.8	13.2	16.0	14.3	18.8	20.9	14.6	16.4	16.9
Mid. Atlantic	2	35.9	27.9	22.9	23.6	21.3	17.7	22.8	23.4	19.8	28.7	20.7	22.7	23.5
Southern	4	10.9	10.6	15.4	19.5	15.4	15.9	13.7	13.6	14.1	12.7	16.6	13.8	14.5
Gulf	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Gt. Lakes.	14	23.0	20.6	16.9	15.5	16.3	11.2	14.0	13.5	16.2	20.1	14.4	14.6	15.8
Nor. Pacific	8	7.6	10.5	11.8	11.1	10.5	12.3	14.9	14.4	16.7	9.9	11.3	15.3	12.4
No. II	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
So. Pacific	4	9.1	11.9	12.1	11.2	9.5	7.5	11.2	6.0	17.5	11.3	9.3	11.6	10.7
Fabricated	3	38.5	26.5	22.6	26.1	17.8	12.8	16.6	19.7	17.8	30.2	18.5	18.0	21.6
All Districts	48	26.0	21.7	18.9	19.0	16.0	13.4	16.1	15.2	18.3	22.3	16.0	16.5	17.8

Wood Ship Yards

Atlantic.	12	20.7	23.3	16.9	16.0	13.8	12.2	13.2	11.4	19.5	20.0	13.7	14.5	15.1
Del. River	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Mid. Atlantic	2	31.0	22.9	23.5	25.3	20.9	20.1	21.9	16.2	20.8	25.7	21.4	20.0	21.3
Southern	4	21.8	21.0	16.2	19.3	20.1	13.6	19.9	18.6	22.1	19.4	17.4	20.3	19.1
Gulf	5	26.0	19.6	17.2	15.0	16.3	19.5	20.0	21.6	22.2	20.5	16.9	21.2	19.4
Gt. Lakes.	1	18.6	25.8	4.7	7.4	14.1	10.3	1.7	.0	.3	17.5	10.8	0.8	11.4
Nor. Pacific	6	9.3	11.0	9.9	9.5	7.0	7.3	8.9	5.7	9.6	10.1	7.7	8.2	8.4
No. II	7	8.1	9.1	9.3	8.6	8.3	7.5	10.7	6.7	7.6	8.9	8.1	8.5	8.4
So. Pacific	5	9.8	12.8	10.9	9.9	6.8	5.8	7.3	4.9	7.4	11.1	7.4	6.6	8.0
Fabricated	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
All Districts	42	15.3	15.9	13.4	12.8	12.2	11.4	13.5	11.3	15.2	14.7	12.1	13.4	13.2

2. *The Losses of Absenteeism*

It is of course impossible to measure accurately or perhaps even approximately the loss which absenteeism entails. Nor should it be thought that all absenteeism is a net loss. For example, a perfect attendance record would mean no vacations, which would cause a decrease in the net productivity of the workers, for a certain amount of absence from industry is undoubtedly necessary in order to obtain the highest efficiency. We do not know how large a percentage this should be, but what does seem perfectly clear is that the amount of absenteeism which now exists is far in excess of that which is necessary to maintain the worker in the highest efficiency.

It is this unnecessary absenteeism that brings with it a loss to the consumer, to the employer and to the employee as well. The consumer of course loses the goods which might have been produced had the worker been on the job. The cost to the employer may be classified as follows:

(a) *Machinery or equipment rendered less efficient by the absence of the worker.* The absence of a man on the pay-roll means either that the equipment and machinery provided for him to work with must go unmanned or that another worker, probably less competent, must assume his job. Since absences can rarely be foretold, it follows almost invariably that some of the equipment and machinery is unmanned. When this occurs the employer has an overhead expense with absolutely no return. When a less competent worker takes the absentee's place, a lessened output results, with greater danger of damage both to the output and to the machinery itself. It follows from this that the more elaborate the machinery and the more highly skilled the worker, the greater will be the loss. Absences, for example, are more costly to the cotton manufacturer than to the street-paving contractor.

(b) *Extra administrative and clerical force required.* The absentees as well as those at work require the services of a clerical force to account for them and to maintain the pay-roll. Indeed they require more because the recording and handling of absence in itself necessitates more attention from the clerical force than do other types of work.

(c) *Lessened productivity of the absentee's associates.* Where work is done by gangs men are seldom, if ever, completely interchangeable, and the absence of one man often decreases the efficiency of those who are working with him.

(d) *Loss of profit upon the labor of the workman himself.* Whatever may be the theoretical truth of the claim that labor gets what it produces, in the actual conduct of industry it is clear that from lack of actual bargaining strength or otherwise, the laborer often does not receive the marginal production of his class but instead loses a part of it to his employer.

The workman's loss is also great. The absentee loses his pay for the period of absence, and this is a large item. The approximately 2,600,000 working days that were lost because of absenteeism in the shipyards during the months of June, July and August, 1918, meant easily an average loss in wages of \$5 per man per day or a total probable loss of \$13,000,000. This for a year would have amounted to \$52,000,000. The prospects are that the loss would have been even greater since there is less absenteeism in the spring and summer than in the autumn and winter. The annual loss of wages per shipbuilder, caused by absenteeism, apparently ranged therefore from \$175 to \$200. If, therefore, we estimate the average amount of absenteeism at 6 per cent. or 18 days per year, it appears that, on the basis of 30,000,000 workers, the annual loss is 540,000,000 working days. Using the extremely conservative estimate of \$3 as the average daily wage, the total annual wage loss would amount to \$1,620,000,000. If we estimate absenteeism at 10 per cent., the annual wage-loss would be \$2,700,000,000. It should be realized that this does not include the time lost through unemployment or by strikes. These are only rough estimates, but they serve to show the truly enormous loss which the United States suffers annually because of absenteeism in labor.

Absenteeism, however, not only causes a money loss to the workman but is also a demoralizing influence. Continual absences, whatever may be their cause, tend to make a man more "foot loose" and less anxious to work steadily or stay at one job for any length of time. Working is something of an acquired habit, which, if interrupted, is frequently difficult to regain.

3. *The Causes of Absenteeism*

The causes of absenteeism, like those of any social phenomenon, are manifold and not susceptible of precise measurement. They are rarely separated but are rather so closely interwoven that the absentee himself can seldom tell which is predominant. There has been sufficient investigation, however, to disclose some of the more important causes, which may be listed as follows:

(a) *Sickness and ill health.* In the two English factories where the time-keeping records were especially accurate, Professor Loveday found that in one, sickness accounted for 54 per cent. of all absences and in the other, for 46 per cent.¹ The time-keeping records of a Scotch shell factory in eight selected weeks in 1917, which Professor Kirkaldy secured, showed that illness caused 62.7 per cent. of the total time lost.² Professor Loveday states that where the time-keeping records are not accurately kept, the percentage due to illness tends to be underestimated. A well-known study of Sydenstricker and Warren estimated that the average American workman lost nine days annually from work because of illness.³ This conclusion is, in the main, supported by the various health surveys which have been conducted by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Sydenstricker, Wheeler and Goldberger's study of South Carolina cotton-mill towns showed that illness caused 32.2 per cent. of the total days lost.⁴ It seems clear, therefore, that poor health is the greatest single cause of absenteeism.

(b) *Accidents.* In the Scottish shell factory which Kirkaldy mentions, accidents caused 5.1 per cent. of the time lost.⁵ This, of course, does not cover the time lost by workmen being compelled to leave their positions because of accidents. In this country, although no definite statistics are available, the hun-

¹ Loveday, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

² Computed from statistics given by Kirkaldy, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

³ Sydenstricker and Warren, "Health Insurance and its Relation to the Public Health", Bulletin no. 76, of the United States Public Health Series.

⁴ Sydenstricker, Wheeler and Goldberger, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁵ Compiled from Kirkaldy, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

dreds of thousands of injuries which occur annually must bring with them the loss of millions of days.¹

(c) *Long hours.* The English investigations have served to show that long hours result not only in the decreased efficiency of the worker while at work but also tend to increase the amount of absenteeism. The experience of 83 English ship-building firms is illustrative of this fact. The approximate number of hours lost by each worker during the week ending March 17, 1916, through avoidable causes only, excluding sickness, accidents, loss by absence *etc.* was 4.24 hours or 60.1 per cent. of the average number of hours worked overtime.² The male employees in 789 engineering establishments for the week ending March 16, 1917, lost 2.9 hours or approximately 50 per cent. of the overtime that they worked, while for the women, the loss through absenteeism was 1.8 hours or 75 per cent. of the overtime worked.³ Statistics for 654 plants for the week ending March 30 of the same year show that the men lost 45 per cent. of the work gained in working overtime and the women 80 per cent.⁴ These statistics should not be interpreted to mean that all this loss was due to overtime work. The effect of overtime should always be considered in connection with the normal working day. For men on an eight-hour day to work ten hours is, of course, the same physiologically as for men on a ten-hour day at a similar job to work ten hours. But there can be little question that a protracted working day means in the end an increase in absenteeism.

(d) *Women in industry.* As has been shown by the statistics which have been quoted, women have an almost uniformly higher rate of absenteeism than men. This is caused not only by their greater susceptibility to illness but also by the pressure of home ties which often compel them to be absent from or tardy at their work. This is, of course, especially true of married women.

¹ There is an excellent opportunity for some one to investigate the records of the various workmen's compensation commissions and determine the total loss of time due to accidents.

² Kirkaldy, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

(e) *Nature of the employment.* Heat, dust or excessive noise all increase absenteeism. Monotony is also an important factor. One need not be an implicit believer in the "instinct of workmanship" or the "creative impulse in industry" or the other terms used by the exponents of the behavioristic school, to recognize that anything which makes a task unpleasant serves to make men shun it at every possible opportunity.

(f) *Prevalence of other work.* If work is plentiful and men hear of other jobs which seem to promise more money, they will take time off to investigate them. This was a very common practice in all industries during the war.

(g) *Payment of overtime bonus.* Under the basic eight-hour day overtime work and work on Sundays is paid for at special rates. It was a common practice of the shipyard workers during the war to work on Sunday at double time and then "lay off" on some week day. They would thus receive seven days' pay for six days' work and have their holiday.

(h) *Lack of materials.* A considerable amount of absenteeism is caused by lack of materials with which the workman can work. This may cause either a general tie-up of the plant as a whole or merely of a specific department. The freight congestion in the winter of 1917 caused a shut-down in many industries and therefore increased absenteeism. This was an example merely of what often happens upon a smaller scale in consequence either of faulty planning or of the lack of coordination in different branches of work.

(i) *Climatic conditions.* Excessive cold or heat, humidity, snow and rain also operate to produce absenteeism. This is particularly true of industries exposed to the weather. The statistics given for shipbuilding show that absenteeism was highest in the winter months and in those states where the weather was most severe and lowest in the Pacific Coast and Southern Atlantic yards, where the temperature was equable and climatic conditions favorable. The hot weeks of the summer were also accompanied by a considerable increase in absenteeism, particularly in the steel yards.

(j) *Housing conditions.* Absenteeism is more frequent when the worker is compelled to live at a distance from his place of

employment. The barrier of distance between him and his work may be sufficient to turn the scale many times in favor of staying at home. Bad housing accompanied by increasing illness will also, of course, affect absenteeism.

(k) *Inadequate transportation facilities.* When transportation is poor, tardiness is unavoidable. When this is combined with distance of residence the loss through lateness becomes all the greater.

(l) *Liquor.* The influence of liquor in causing absenteeism cannot be accurately measured. The majority of employment managers, however, state that from their observation, drinking men are absent far more frequently than abstainers. It is also true that shipyards in dry states have somewhat better attendance records than those in wet states. Although the whole matter is one on which no absolute statement can be made, it seems reasonably certain, all other things being equal, that complete prohibition will bring with it a decided improvement in working attendance.

(m) *Wage income higher than standard of living.* When a workman receives more money than he wishes to spend or save, he will stop working and thus bring his income down to his standard of living. "Laziness", when it is not physiological, is to be explained by this fact. The Southern negro is a frequent absentee from work because his wants are few and easily satisfied. After he has his "bacon, pipe and watermelon" he prefers leisure to the satisfaction of additional material wants. The only difference between the negro and the average white in this matter is that the latter's higher standard of living requires him to work harder and absent himself less often from work in order to gratify his wants. If therefore real wages increase faster than the standard of living, absenteeism necessarily results. This was the situation created in several war industries where wages increased faster than the wants of the worker. It was undoubtedly a factor in certain sections of the shipbuilding and munition industries.¹ A higher stand-

¹ Mr. L. C. Marshall, Director of the Industrial Relations Division of the Emergency Fleet Corporation, called attention to this fact in a bulletin issued by his division in August, 1918.

ard of living, therefore, decreases absenteeism as indeed does an increase in prices. It should be clearly realized that the term "higher standard of living" carries with it no ethical implications. It might perhaps more accurately be called "more expensive standard of living". The new wants which go to form it may be vicious. The Hawaiian planters are said to prefer dissolute laborers, addicted to drinking and gambling, to sober men, because they work harder and more constantly to satisfy their wants. From the standpoint of human values, therefore, absenteeism with all its waste may be far more profitable than some additional wants. Those who believe that progress consists in the multiplication of wants would do well to consider the qualitative as well as the quantitative aspects of the standard of living.

(n) *Separation of interests between workman and employer.* The modern employer and employee are separated from each other to such a degree that neither appreciates the other's functions or tasks. The workman who seldom sees his managers and for whom the stockholders are but shadows can scarcely be expected to take much interest in the welfare of the business. When in addition owners and managers receive rewards which to the workman, at least, seem exorbitant, for contributions which to him are intangible or non-existent, the estrangement is increased. Even when this feeling of separateness does not express itself in "sabotage" or "ca-canny" and conscious interference with production, an unconscious hostility or apathy which results in withheld effort is almost everywhere apparent. It is this psychological factor as well as the difference in economic interest which produces so many inefficiencies in production. Absenteeism in common with other wastes is increased by the attitude which the worker assumes, consciously or unconsciously, towards his employer.

4. *Methods of Reducing Absenteeism*

(a) *Establishment of an efficient employment department.* Such a department is necessary to measure the extent of absenteeism in the various departments as well as in the plant as a whole. Statistical information such as it would collect is not

only necessary to show the real state of affairs but would furnish valuable data for interdepartmental comparison and for questions of promotion and discharge. An employment department is needed also to discover the causes of absenteeism and to act as a central agency in applying remedies. For the effective performance of these two latter functions, however, a broader conception of the subject is requisite than the present group of employment managers on the whole possess.¹ At present the majority of employment managers are little but glorified timekeepers who have no voice in determining the fundamental labor policies of their concerns, without which no real settlement of labor problems can be effective.

(b) *Investigation of absences.* Many plants have systems whereby absentees are visited. This method is likely to arouse antagonism unless carefully safeguarded. In some plants the visit is made by either a nurse or a doctor in order that suspicion may not be excited. The Hood Rubber Company and the Ford Company use this method very effectively and find that the situation is made much easier by the assumption that absences are caused by illness.² Medical attention can be given by this method to those who need it and complaints against the firm heard and presented for settlement. This method, however, must be delicately applied or it will be resented.

(c) *Imposition of fines for tardiness and absence.* These fines may be either deductions of pay for time lost or deductions of more than this. In the latter case the resentment of the worker is quite generally aroused, particularly when the fines are, as so often happens, excessive in amount. This resentment is heightened when the employers themselves receive the fines. Moreover, many workers are absent or late on justifiable grounds and should not be fined, but it is almost impos-

¹ It is not intended to include in this statement such broadminded and liberal experts as Captain Boyd Fisher, Willard E. Hotchkiss, Meyer Jacobstein and many other leaders.

² R. S. Quimby, "How we Investigate Absences and Why", *Factory*, Sep., 1918, pp. 438-9.

sible to draw the line between justifiable and unjustifiable "lost time" and attempts to do so invariably cause bitterness. Employees who are frequently absent or tardy without good cause may, of course, properly be discharged, but while employed, it is probably better not to impose fines or penalties.

(d) *Bonuses for attendance.* A better plan than the system of fines is that of paying bonuses for good attendance. Professor Davis R. Dewey, formerly, of the Information and Education Service of the Department of Labor, has issued bulletins which summarize the plans in operation in fourteen establishments.¹ These bonuses are of various kinds and are aimed to reduce tardiness as well as absenteeism. They are generally payable weekly or at most monthly and usually vary from 5 to 10 per cent. of the wage. One firm gives a flat bonus of twenty-five cents a day to those who have had a perfect attendance record. In several cases a cumulative bonus is given if another period goes by without absence. To this bonus for attendance is often added another bonus to lessen turn-over, whereby a man is rewarded if he stays with the firm for a given period, which is generally six months or a year. While the bonus plan is, on the whole, probably effective, it presents certain very decided difficulties. In the first place, as in the case of fines, the settlement of exemption is provocative of discontent. Many excuses are just, but judgment is not easy, and men whose excuses have been denied are likely to become dissatisfied at the loss of the bonus, although not to so great a degree as if they had been fined. To avoid the adjudication of excuses some firms have adopted hard-and-fast rules whereby a man who is even a few seconds late automatically loses the bonus. Moreover, when employees lose their chance of a bonus early in the working period, either by absence or by tardiness, they generally lose interest for the rest of the period and do not care much about punctuality or good attendance thereafter. This, however, lasts only during that one period since they have a chance at the bonus during the next period. This is in itself

¹ See Bulletins 1 and 3, issued by the Economic Division of the Information and Education Service of the United States Department of Labor.

sufficient reason why the period for which the bonuses are given should be as short as is convenient.¹

(e) *Competitive devices to stimulate interest.* Another method is to have attendance contests between the departments or plants, with a prize or bonus for the winner. This has the advantage of arousing group enthusiasm and of being easy to administer, and with proper publicity it can be somewhat effective.

(f) *A shorter working day with the omission of the overtime bonus.* The remedies previously proposed are such as could be introduced without any changes in the method of conducting industry. They are extrinsic to the "labor problem" as such and, while important, are not sufficient to cope fully with the problem. More fundamental readjustments are necessary if absenteeism is to be reduced to a minimum. As one of the steps in this program, there can be little question that the working day in most industries should be reduced. The physiological effects of a long day are such as necessarily produce absenteeism, and it seems clear that the introduction of the eight-hour day or its equivalent, in arduous industries, would result in better time-keeping and less absenteeism. Nor should the basic eight-hour day be substituted, for this is not an eight-hour day at all. The overtime bonus is not a sufficient check upon the length of the working day.

(g) *Improvement of working conditions.* Shop sanitation and accident prevention will produce a more constant as well as a more efficient working force. The reduction to a minimum of noise, heat, dust and fumes together with the introduction of properly spaced rest periods are necessary steps in reducing absenteeism. The problem of decreasing monotony is far more difficult and still seems insoluble.

(h) *Prohibition.* The prevention of the sale and use of intoxicating liquors, resulting from the Prohibition Amendment, will probably have among other results the effect of decreasing absenteeism and insuring a more dependable labor force.

¹ For a summarization of the objections to attendance bonuses, see *Factory*, Aug., 1918, p. 223.

(i) *The cultivation of the cooperative spirit between employers and workmen.* The more or less conscious hostility which workmen cherish toward their employers cannot be removed by statements that the interests of the two parties are identical. The confidence and cooperation of the workers can be secured only by sharing with them control over the conditions of labor and by acquainting them with the problems of management. The institution of shop committees charged with the direction of matters that affect labor would be justified if, as seems probable, it released the withheld effort and interest of the worker. Nor should the shop committees be designed as substitutes for the unions but rather as supplements to them in the endeavor to increase production while allowing collective bargaining to be handled by the unions themselves. Works committees of this nature reduced absenteeism in England during the war to a marked degree, especially in the mines.

(j) *Improvement of certain social conditions.* But absenteeism cannot be reduced to a minimum solely by measures within a given plant. Basic social conditions must be improved. Illness is undoubtedly the chief cause of absenteeism and is, itself, chiefly caused perhaps by low wages, poor housing and inadequate sanitation. The economic argument for a decent wage, for health insurance, for good housing and for public health measures finds an added support in the disclosure of the extent and losses of absenteeism. It is important that American employers should investigate carefully the amount of absenteeism in their industries and should try to determine its basic cause.

PAUL H. DOUGLAS.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON.